Modes of Address:

Language in Art Since 1960

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This exhibition was organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program: Tom Hardy, Amy Heard, Ingrid Periz, and Michael Waldron.

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Andy Warhol, serigraph from the portfolio *Flash—November 22, 1963*, 1968

In movements such as Color Field painting, and in the critical literature on art that had evolved by the 1950s, color and form were seen as the only essential components in a purely visual field. In this formalist view, the inherent spatial and static quality of the visual arts differentiated them from the verbal and temporal arts of poetry or writing. This gap between the verbal and the visual was thought to be absolute: each mode of expression had its own inalienable forms, and if the boundaries between them were transgressed, the critically defined integrity of the work would be diminished, if not altogether lost. Thus, for a painting to be experienced as a true work of visual art, it had to communicate visually and immediately—without the temporality associated with linguistic references.

In the late 1950s, these assumptions were challenged: some forty years after its appearance in Cubism and collage, language reentered the realm of the visual arts. The works of both Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns contain depictions of letters and fragments of words. However, this art makes only passing references to the verbal. Rauschenberg transferred mere snippets of newsprint onto his canvases, forming complex rebuses of pastiched words.

More legible words, read as one might read a text, first emerged only in the early 1960s, in the works of Pop and Conceptual artists. Though far apart in form and content, Pop and Conceptual art ask to be read, not simply gazed upon. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, for example, incorporated the idiomatic words of everyday news flashes, cartoons, and advertisements into their art. The more hermetic works of the Conceptual artists Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth often took the form of a text describing the work itself. At this time artists' writings became important as well, not simply as textual commentaries or manifestos, but as integral aspects of art production. These various moves into the critically forbidden realm of the verbal can best be seen as reactions against the dominant formalism of the preceding period. By including language, Pop and Conceptual artists opened up the usually mute, autonomous forms of visual art to new intellectual and social experiences.

For Pop artists, mass culture offered a way not only to reintroduce subject matter, but also to disrupt the high art tradition. Pop reveled in its links to the popular and the everyday. At the same time, however, the works of Warhol, Edward Ruscha, and others suggested a critical reflection on Hollywood, stardom, advertising, and media hype. In Warhol's *Flash—November 22, 1963* (1968), the events surrounding President Kennedy's assassination are depicted through a profusion of newspaper images accompanied by simulated wire service bulletins, pointing to the ability of tabloid hyperbole to render the reader insensitive to disaster. Language loses any ties to actual experience in such spectacles, becoming a mere symbol for trivialized emotion. By enlarging and cropping images and splicing in text, Pop artists commented on the experience both of art and popular American culture.

Conceptual art also investigated the reception of high art, but from within its own sphere. It questioned the assertion that the viewer visually perceives an artwork instantaneously. In Conceptual art, the act of viewing entails more than a visual examination; it is also a mental experience, a linguistic puzzling out of the piece. In the work of John Baldessari or Joseph Kosuth, for example, the combination of text and image does not complete the work; they must be read together and synthesized by the receiver's own intellectual processes.

During the seventies, the attention of many artists shifted toward the investigation of the cultural norms which affect the reading of art. Artists began to question, among other things, the effect of institutional status and monetary value on the way a work is interpreted by the viewer. The components of a museum presentation, including the arrangement of pictures, wall texts, and catalogue essays, were also brought under scrutiny. Conceptions previously held to be extrinsic to the artwork, such as race, class, and gender, were also seen to influence the interpretation of art. Because these concepts are largely constructed in language, visual artists employed words to express as well as to contest them.

Much recent art continues to speak against the bias of cultural norms, bringing its operations to light and offering alternatives. Works of art are revealed as expensive goods on display, for example, in Louise Lawler's photographs of private collectors' homes and corporate offices. Her glasses with text such as *Are You a Tourist?* (1987) are consumer objects rather than sculpture, kitsch art souvenirs placed on display racks as though each were for sale. With *Native Is Pain* (1986), Edgar Heap of Birds calls for a reexamination of the intersections of the viewer's everyday life and Native American experience. Richard Prince, with his *Untitled* Polaroid series (1986), offers a different representation of women from that which is presented in his source, Hollywood film. In such works as *Untitled (Hard to Believe)* (1987), Larry Johnson arrests the current of consumer language, representing it in Day-Glo colors against a flat, black background to expose its distance from any actual events. The phrase "PEOPLE WITH AIDS," which by now has become almost matter-of-fact, is affixed to a television screen in Gretchen Bender's *Untitled* (1987). These words encourage a reconsideration of the hype surrounding the epidemic as well as of the media images which foster this hype.

Works such as these make room not only for novel modes of looking at art within a museum, but also for new ways of viewing the flux of words and images predominant in our culture at large. Since these discourses structure not only art, but the lives of those who create and view art as well, the dismantling of conventional representations has become the fundamental critical task of artists today.

Michael Waldron
Amy Heard

Language in Conceptual Art

For those artists associated with Conceptual art, language functions primarily as a material or medium through which to critique both the traditional status of the artwork and the conventional position of the viewer as a passive receiver of images. In addition, Conceptual art establishes an aesthetic frame which takes into account the operation of art within a broader social context.

Arakawa is concerned with the perceptual processes which constitute aesthetic experience itself. In *Separated Continuums* (1964), objects are presented in terms of the linguistic signs which denote them—thus as verbal propositions rather than physical entities. The viewer is asked to structure these various propositions in what Arakawa has called "blank" spaces—spaces from which various conflicting linguistic, aesthetic, and psychological interpretations can emerge.

For Robert Barry art is a practice almost entirely removed from a physically defined location—"outside the frame," as he termed it in 1968. In *"It can be"* (1972), words liberated from a syntactic framework are projected onto the wall to indicate the various situations in which aesthetic experience takes place. Phrases like "fitted in," "waited for," and "put down" appear with no definite reference to an object, and advocate instead a self-reflective response from the viewer. As a result, emotive and psychological associations are highlighted. "I use words," Barry says, "because they speak out to the viewer. . . . They bridge the gap between the viewer and the piece."

Like Arakawa and Barry, Joseph Kosuth proposes an aesthetic which is not directed *a priori* toward the production of objects, and which is intended to affect a shift in the traditional ontology of art. His work, influenced by language philosophers such as Wittgenstein, is essentially an analysis of linguistic propositions. "All I make are models," Kosuth has said, "the actual works of art are ideas. Rather than 'ideals' the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind." *Wall—One and Five* (1965) defines five states which describe the "idea" of a wall—a photograph, an actual wall, and the definitions of "white," "plaster," and "wall," respectively. The materials of the work operate solely as vehicles to reproduce or document the idea; as a result, the work cannot be approached as an organic whole. It refers to the arbitrary nature of concepts, whose meanings, like definitions, are forever changing.

With Lawrence Weiner it is less the material basis of the artwork which is put into question than its manner of presentation. On the production of his art and its relationship with the viewer, Weiner has stated:

> 1. The artist may construct the work.
> 2. The work may be fabricated.
> 3. The work need not be built.
> Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

OVERDONE. DONEOVER. AND OVERDONE. AND DONEOVER. (1971) refers to the processes, conditions, and actions by which some object or material is structured as aesthetic and utilized within the context of art. For Weiner, a sculptor who uses words, the advantage of language as a medium is that it obviates the kind of irreversible action or condition with which object-making is usually bound up. The "decision as to condition" reiterates a common concern of the artists represented in this exhibition—namely, the relationship of the viewer not only to the artwork and artist, but also to the social context within which the artwork is shown.

Bruce Nauman examines the conflicting relationship between the artist's private expression and the artwork's public reception. His neon works characteristically address interpersonal issues—sexual and political violence in particular. However, in *Window* or *Wall Sign* (1967), whose spiral text reads "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," Nauman debunks the idea of the artist as priest and the work of art as divine revelation.

John Baldessari's *Blasted Allegories* (1978) is a playful manipulation of linguistic and visual structures. Composed of television images collaged with descriptive captions, these works not only contest the images and texts of everyday media life, but also challenge notions of connoisseurship so critical to high culture. *Blasted Allegories* in general calls attention to interpretive processes by disrupting any straightforward movement from linguistic sign or visual image to its referent.

Influential in developing an art practice concerned with social critique, Hans Haacke seeks to subvert the so-called "autonomy" of art, the deeply ingrained notion that art is an activity divorced from social reality. Haacke refers to the art world as an "industry" in order, he says, to cut through "the romantic clouds that envelop the often misleading and mythical notions widely held about the production, distribution, and consumption of art." His work seeks to trace the ideological ramifications of these systems. *Tiffany Cares* (1977–78), for example, exposes the ideological contradictions inherent to post-industrial capitalism through a cunningly constructed reversal of Tiffany & Co.'s altruistic pronouncements.

Dennis Balk draws attention to the relationship between criticism and the production and viewing of art. Excerpts from a text by art historian Rosalind Krauss are aligned with reproductions of significant Minimalist artworks. These juxtapositions call attention to important changes which have occurred in the production of abstract art over the past twenty years and in the viewer's position in relation to the work of art.

No one approach to the use or philosophy of language predominates in Conceptual art. Conceptual artists do, however, have one thing in common: they all attempt to establish a dialectical relationship among art, language, and what art and language signify—a dialectic within which our reading of the work takes place.

Tom Hardy

Bruce Nauman, *Window or Wall Sign*, 1967

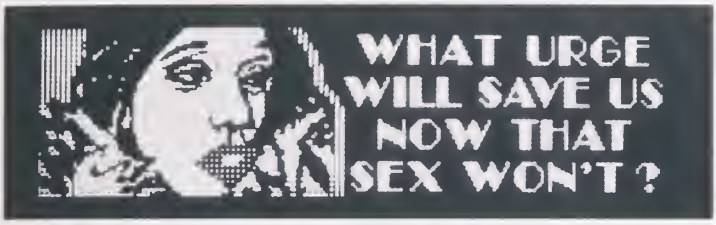
All of the work by women included in this exhibition concerns itself with representational systems. These systems are as varied as the means employed in their investigation, yet the work of these artists is unified by its critical rigor. Language, whether used for the purposes of naming or narration, description or analysis, is featured both as object and instrument of analysis and is used against itself as well as against the image.

Some of the impulses in this body of work arise from recent art history, others from the women's movement and the development of feminist politics and aesthetics. In the early seventies, questions of personal identity and private versus collective experience predominated. These concerns continue, but are now informed by a critical use of a number of theoretical frameworks—psychoanalysis, structuralism, and semiotics. There is also a shift in the kind of attention paid to the image. Whereas earlier feminist efforts were directed toward the development of positive or "real" images of women, what is now under scrutiny is representation itself—the act of image-making, the construction of language, the operation of the mass media, and the institutional activities of the museum.

Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–75) marks a different use of language from that of Conceptual art. Her concern is not with an epistemological investigation of the object; we are asked not "what is the Bowery?" but rather, "what is the relationship of that term to its construction in two representational practices?" These practices are, for Rosler's purposes, those of socially concerned documentary photography and the formations of everyday speech. In the conjunction of these two systems, Rosler suggests the mutual impoverishment of each. The documentary status of the photographs appears eroded by the presence of the text, while the text in its very repetitiveness indicates the redundancy of any linguistic approximation of the condition of drunkenness. Rosler deflects the question of the subject back onto the viewer. By positioning the viewer between a concerned moralism and a voyeuristic pleasure in the spectacle of the slum, she asks "why look?" and further, "what is the nature of power enacted in the processes of looking and describing?"

The work of Mary Kelly and Adrian Piper immediately engages the viewer in a narrative situation as a reader of personal histories. In their concern for such histories, Piper and Kelly thus continue an earlier feminist interest in the political dimension of that realm we designate as private and in questions of experience and identity.

Piper's work has long concerned itself with autobiography. As a woman artist of mixed ancestry who identifies herself as black, she has sought to incorporate in her work the experience of tacit and overt racism. She has continually questioned the distinction between "art" and "life." Her biography, for example, is often exhibited as a work in



itself, and includes information about her extended family and her pets, as well as the more familiar details of education and professional life. The story told in *A Tale of Avarice and Poverty* (1985) is one of unacknowledged kinship and separation. It is narrated in six panels arranged around a central image of the female protagonist. The image serves as a constant anchoring point for the narrative while the questions raised about the relationship of race to identity produce no fixed answers.

Kelly's series *Interim* (1985) deals with the history of the female body, specifically in the period of middle age. The texts can be read as small episodes in an individual woman's life, while the images invite an almost voyeuristic pleasure in their anatomical perversity. While Kelly bases the work on her own experiences and those of her friends, experiences which are fictionalized in the narration, the process of aging and the relationship of self-image to representation is one in which all women participate.

Like Piper, Hannah Wilke pursues the distinctions between art and life, the public and the private. In *Advertisements for Living*, from the *So Help Me Hannah* series (1966–84), she combines candidly personal photographs with the ambiguous portent of a male surname, usually of a well-known art world figure. We might ask what the relationship of

Jenny Holzer, excerpts from *Unex Sign #1* (selections from *The Survival Series*), 1983

the female artist is to the rule of the male name. In the formal rigor of the paired images (Wilke likens them to billboord odvertisements for cigarettes), the name is reduced to o brand or lobel, serving as guarantee of authority for a work of art or an ideological system. Reading is obviated, for one recognizes rather than reads labels.

The work of Silvia Kolbowski and Barbara Kruger interrogates the site occupied by the viewer, exomining what might be termed the economy of looking. Kolbowski's focus is the museum, while Kruger examines spectatorship. Kolbowski's *Enlarged from the Catalogue I* (1987) uses an image derived from an exhibition of pre-Columbian artifacts, remnants from a plundered civilization now displayed as works of art. The image is combined with excerpts from the catologue, extracts from texts of history ond ethnographic methodology. By displacing the benign outhority of the catalogue, the exhibition, and the museum, Kolbowski questions both the importiality and the source of this authority. Furthermore, the work invites viewers to investigate their own position in this process, for superimposed across the work is the question "What/map/am I/are you/we/they/charting?" Can one look innocently ot these objects without acknowledging the violence of a history which the exhibition and the museum seek to efface? Kolbowski suggests that any object placed within the orbit of the museum must be subject to similar scrutiny.

In *Untitled (I'm just looking)* (1987), Barbara Kruger wryly connects looking and buying, art exhibition, and store display. While the combination of image and text in her best-known works makes for an immediately opparent feminist edge, this work is a little more ambiguous. In the conjunction of the bloodied female face and the text, however, the question of gender is not entirely displaced, for Kruger clearly targets the position of woman. "Woman" is considered both as the stereotypicol shopper ond os the object available for purchase. The violence of Kruger's image indicates the cost of such stereotyping.

"REMEMBER TO REACT." This is the final sentence to flosh across Jenny Holzer's *Unex Sign #1* (1983). In this self-reflexive gesture, Holzer issues a command to spectators, a call to attention. Such a call is paradoxical insofar as one's capacity for attention is rendered difficult by the constantly moving electronic images. The spectrocolor sign functions more as urban decoration than as an instrument of communication. Clearly, the doomsday scenario constructed by the work demands more than literal attention. It is produced allusively through the cumulative effect of a number of statements and commands which, individually, read as nonsense. The sign condenses information and in effect does our reading for us. In a world of mass-media news production—the news reduced to a flash—Holzer suggests the need for a continually vigilant response.

Ingrid Periz

Works in the Exhibition

Whitney Museum of American Art
Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza
33 Maiden Lane at Nassau Street
New York, New York 10038

GALLERY HOURS

Monday–Friday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm
Free admission

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Charles A. Wright, Jr., *Gallery Assistant*

Hannah Wilke, selectians fram *Advertisements for Living* from the *So Help Me Hannah* Series, 1966–84

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Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Arakawa (b. 1936)

Separated Continuums, 1964
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 66 × 120
Collection of the artist, courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

John Baldessari (b. 1931)

Blasted Allegories (B & W Sentence): Grey Jar Acronym, 1978
Five black-and-white photographs and pencil on board, 27½ × 40 overall
Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Blasted Allegories (Colorful Headlines) Equation: Symmetrical News Together Fair Whether, 1978
Four Type C prints and pencil on board, 14¾ × 40 overall
Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Dennis Balk (b. 1952)

Series: Mid To Late 80's Abstraction Work, #3, Collection Of Edited Texts And Transcripts—1987, 1988
Formica, duratrans, and fluorescent lights, 65 × 38¼ × 25½
Collection of the artist

Robert Barry (b. 1936)

"It can be", 1972
81 projected 35mm slides, dimensions variable
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Gretchen Bender (b. 1951)

Untitled (PEOPLE WITH AIDS), 1987
Two televisions with screen print on plexiglass, 15 × 15 × 20 each
Collection of the artist, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

Hans Haacke (b. 1936)

Tiffany Cares, 1977–78
Brass pedestal, wood, velvet, silver-plated copper plate with etched text, and satin with gold stamping, 33¾ × 22 × 22
Collection of Gilbert and Lila Silverman

Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954)

Native Is Pain, 1986
Acrylic on paper, 108 × 48
Collection of the artist

Jenny Holzer (b. 1950)

Unex Sign #1 (selections from *The Survival Series*), 1983
Spectrocolor machine with moving graphics, 30½ × 116½ × 11⅝
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., Seymour M. Klein, President 84.8

Larry Johnson (b. 1959)

Untitled (All), 1987
Type C print, 40 × 40
Collection of Richard Prince, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Untitled (Hard to Believe), 1987
Type C print, 40 × 40
Collection of Steven Salzman

Mary Kelly (b. 1941)

Appel Diptych #1, from the series *Interim*, 1985
Laminated photo positive and screen print on plexiglass; two panels, 48 × 36 each
Postmasters Gallery, New York

Appel Diptych #2, from the series *Interim*, 1985
Laminated photo positive and screen print on plexiglass; two panels, 48 × 36 each
Postmasters Gallery, New York

Silvia Kolbowski (b. 1953)

Enlarged from the Catalogue I, 1987
Glass, paint, matboard, and metal frames; 15 panels, 49 × 102 overall
Postmasters Gallery, New York

Joseph Kosuth (b. 1945)

Wall—One and Five, 1965
Black-and-white photograph and three photostats mounted on masonite, approximately 21½ × 192 overall
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Barbara Kruger (b. 1945)

Untitled (I'm just looking), 1987
Lenticular photograph, 23 × 50 overall
Collection of Martin Edelston, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Louise Lawler (b. 1947)

Are You a Tourist?, 1987
Six embossed glasses and shelf, 10½ × 22 × 4 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

There Is No Writing On the Wall, 1988
Six embossed glasses and shelf, 5½ × 22 × 4 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923)

Sweet Dreams, Baby!, from the portfolio *11 Pop Artists*, Vol. III, 1965
Serigraph, 37⅝ × 27½
Collection of Joan and David Genser

Bruce Nauman (b. 1941)

Window or Wall Sign, 1967
Neon and glass tubing, 59 × 55 × 7
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Adrian Piper (b. 1948)

A Tale of Avarice and Poverty, 1985
Black-and-white photograph and six panels of text; photograph, 36 × 24; text panels, 11 × 8½ each
Collection of the artist

Richard Prince (b. 1949)

Untitled (Angie), 1986
Color Polaroid, 30⅜ × 24½
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Untitled (Sissie Carrie), 1986
Color Polaroid, 30⅜ × 24½
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Martha Rosler (b. 1943)

The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, 1974–75
36 black-and-white photographs and 36 panels of text, 8 × 10 each
Collection of the artist

Edward Ruscha (b. 1937)

A Certain Form of Hell, 1983
Oil on canvas, 64 × 64
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Andy Warhol (1925–1987)

Flash—November 22, 1963, 1968
Nine serigraphs from a portfolio of 11 color photoserigraphs, each with individual cover folder with text by Phillip Greer; serigraphs, 20 15/16 × 20 15/16 each; cover folders, 21½ × 42½ each
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Irving 70.11. 3–12 a–c

Lawrence Weiner (b. 1941)

OVERDONE. DONEOVER. AND OVERDONE. AND DONEOVER., 1971
Sign paint on wall, dimensions variable
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Hannah Wilke (b. 1940)

Advertisements for Living, from the *So Help Me Hannah* Series: David Smith (Goddard, Wilke), 1966–84
Two Type C prints, 29 × 82 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Advertisements for Living, from the *So Help Me Hannah* Series: Marx (Oldenburg, Scharlatt), 1966–84
Two Type C prints, 29 × 82 overall
Collection of the artist, courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

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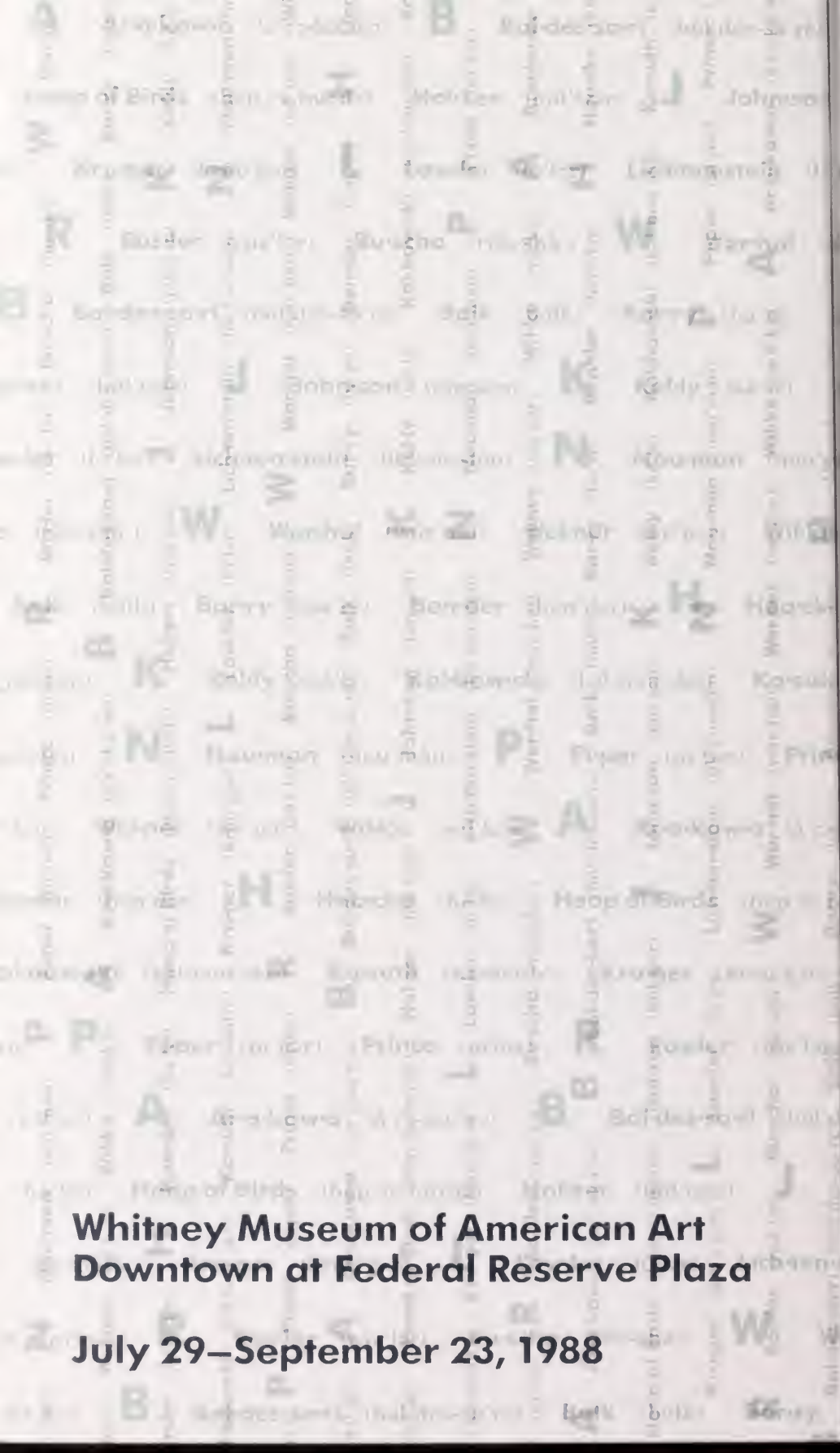

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Downtown at Federal Reserve Plaza

July 29—September 23, 1988